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# Churches Need to Be There for Kids, and Parents, When School Returns

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“What will school look like this year?”

This seems to be the question on every parent, teacher, and administrator’s mind. I’d also argue that it needs to be the question on every church’s mind as we enter into the fall.

When I learned I'd be working with 200K More Reasons, I was thrilled to expand the reach of Arkansas churches beyond children's hunger initiatives to include more efforts to alleviate poverty in our state. I knew we'd be helping churches to host summer feeding ministries, coordinating health initiatives, jumpstarting literacy programs, and finding ways to support parents and grandparents. Yet, as I look at what is to come, I realize how big a task that is- especially in a climate of social distancing, mask wearing, and protecting our vulnerable populations.

This school year is going to look vastly different than any other. As schools make decisions about class sizes, online instruction, how many days students will be on campus, and how teachers will need to navigate this shifting reality, churches need to be there as a resource to our schools. This means three things:

1. Churches need to start conversations now with teachers, administrators, and parents and make plans to continually check-in.
2. Churches need to focus on low-income, working families and single-parent households.
3. Churches need to advocate for health and safety while remembering the services provided by our public education system.

There is a United Methodist Church located in every county in Arkansas. Often more than one! Our churches are uniquely positioned to help schools navigate the reality of a challenging fall semester.

However, churches should start having conversations now.

Perhaps your congregation has an existing relationship with a school through a backpack program or school pantry. Ask what new challenges the staff are facing this fall. Locate the teachers in your congregation and see what they need for their classrooms.

Remember to keep checking in as schools respond to a changing environment. Teachers will be monitoring their situations and adjusting- if you continue to check-in, they may be able to find support in your congregation by sewing masks or meeting other needs as they arise.

The greatest resource connecting congregations to the school community is parents. Be sure to contact parents involved in your ministries and see what concerns they have about returning to learning. Empower these families to reach out to their friends and parents in their children's classrooms. Equip them as liaisons between classes and the church reporting the needs of families as the school year progresses.

Again, when churches connect early and often, they can help offer the love and peace of Christ in the midst of a stressful year.

As schools consider their plans for the semester, many are opting for decreased in-person instruction. This decision negatively and disproportionately impacts families who rely on

schools for childcare especially single, working parents. It also hurts students who rely on schools for up to two meals a day.

Is your congregation ready and capable to fill a gap in either food ministries or childcare this fall? What kind of things could your congregation do to help vulnerable families not have to choose between childcare and making a living?

In preparing for the school year, take an inventory of your church's physical resources. Do you have a church van? WiFi? A parking lot? Church vans are a safe way to deliver food or supplies as a recognizable organization. Opening the WiFi to students to use from the parking lot might help with homework and classwork. Thinking creatively about your resources can help to serve your neighbors well.

Lastly, schools provide an unbelievable range of services to families that may have been disregarded before this pandemic. However, after this spring, the importance of schools to a well-functioning society is without question.

As people of faith, we are commanded to care for the poor, widow and orphan (who we might identify as the impoverished, single moms, and kids who, by no fault of their own, have to parent themselves).

To stand beside these groups is to ask, "when and if schools move to less in-class instruction, where will kids receive food?" How can employers help single parents to keep working while being there for their kids? What do families need to stay strong at this time?

Over and over again, churches shifted how we DO church in response to COVID-19. Now, churches must shift how to BE the church to children and families in Arkansas.

Churches have MORE REASONS than ever to do so.

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